

Historical and legislative note about Italian integration process.

Up to 1970 children with disabilities attended so-called special schools and/or special classes within normal schools. These special schools and classes accepted children with every type of disability (blind, deaf, those with mental or physical disabilities of whatever severity). During that period, two important trends occurred in Italy that radically influenced the government's approach to providing schooling for pupils with disabilities:

1) *The Industrial Boom*. During the 1960s and 1970s, Italy enjoyed a full-scale economic boom with rapid industrial development. This brought with it a massive migration of labor in particular from Southern Italy, to the industries in the large cities of Northern Italy. In consequence, the children of these migrant families were uprooted from their cultural context. They often had difficulty in verbal communication, since in their places of origin they had generally spoken only their local dialect. In many cases they experienced considerable difficulty at school, as they had trouble understanding Italian, interrelating with their peers and being accepted into a new and very different social environment. These difficulties in turn caused learning problems; for teachers, the easiest solution was often that of transferring such pupils to special classes.

In 1974, the Ministry for Public Education¹ recorded a rapid increase in the number of special classes (in the school year 1970-71 there were 6,199 special classes in the elementary school [age 6-11] and 878 special classes in the middle school [age 11-14]). It became apparent that many children whose only problem was one of social adaptation were being placed in special classes, which until then had contained children with mental or physical disabilities. In effect, such placement further marginalized these migrant children.

2) *Student Unrest*. The Commission was also forced to come to terms with the another phenomenon of those years: the student unrest that began in 1968. This movement accused schools of being élitist and of marginalizing pupils from less privileged backgrounds. The wider question of the marginalization of persons with disabilities became the object of lively debate, in academic circles, on the part of the trade unions, and in the mass media. Calls came from many sides to end the isolation of "different" individuals and to abolish the special schools¹. It was realized that there is a continual interaction between disability and social marginalization: social marginalization frequently causes disability, and disability in turn causes social marginalization.

Italian research of those and later years (Cancrini, 1974; Mannoni, 1976; Bellomo & Ribolzi, 1976; Cameroni, 1983) demonstrated that the incidence of persons with disabilities is significantly higher among social classes that are at an economic and cultural disadvantage, and that difficulty in adapting to school is frequently linked to environmental factors, in particular to socio-cultural and economic factors. They maintained that social interaction in a context of normality is a basic condition for the

¹ The Ministry for Public Education is the governmental body responsible for public education at all levels throughout Italy

growth of the personality, and enables the subject to develop self-esteem and a sense of personal identity and of his or her role in society. The special classes were set up with the intent of helping children with disabilities to take their place in society; however, by depriving them of the possibility of interacting with their peers without disabilities, they had the opposite effect: social marginalization of the subject and aggravation of the disability.

A Ministerial Commission was set up to examine the problem and propose solutions. The Final Report of the Commission (1975) demanded "a new way of being for schools, the fundamental condition for full scholastic inclusion". It said that "overcoming every form of marginalization of persons with disabilities entails a new way of conceiving and organizing schools, so that every child, every adolescent must be accepted and their personal growth must be encouraged". It also said that "attending normal schools for persons with disabilities does not make it impossible for minimum common cultural goals to be achieved". Based on the Commission's Final Report, Circular No. 227, was issued by the Ministry for Public Education on August 8th 1975. This document stated that the goals to be achieved, inclusion of children with disabilities in normal schools and normal classes, *"will be made possible through the transformation and renovation of schools, which must progressively acquire the capability of accepting those pupils who, during the years of obligatory schooling, have particular difficulty in learning and adaptation"*.

The "special classes system" was, on the basis of Circular No. 227, gradually replaced by the "inclusion system", which means that, starting from the school year 1976/77, special classes in elementary schools [age 6-11] were abolished and pupils with and without disabilities entered the same classes. Teachers who had worked in the special schools were transferred to normal schools to work as "support" teachers, i.e. additional teachers allocated to classes that contained children with disabilities.

It is significant that the Italian Constitution sanctions the right to work for all citizens. This became the central point around which demands from the families of children with disabilities revolved. Associations of parents of children with disabilities were formed, and received support from the trade unions. The right to work permeates the entire inclusion policy, since the right to work gives rise to the right to receive an education, the right to receive professional training, and the right to utilize public services.

Subsequently the Italian Government and the Ministry for Public Education issued approximately 50 laws, decree laws, decrees, ministerial orders and circulars. These regulated the several problems relating to inclusion in school, and addressed the various problems as they emerged. The questions tackled were that of overcoming and eliminating material obstacles and barriers; providing free transport to and from school for pupils with disabilities; providing basic personal care for pupils with disabilities in schools; setting up medical services; introducing activities to facilitate inclusion and support; making school organization more flexible (for

example combining two classes together for logistic reasons and deciding numbers and hours of support teachers); deciding the contents of examinations for children with disabilities (a significant problem, since the middle school diploma in Italy is valid for the purposes of entering the labor market); ensuring continuity throughout the education system; assessing pupils with disabilities; producing a Personalized Education Plan for each pupil with disabilities; and reaching agreement between schools, municipalities, medical and social services.

After two decades during which regulations of various types had addressed specific aspects of the difficulties arising from the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in schools, on February 5th 1992, Law No. 104 was passed. This is a Framework Law bringing together all the previous directives, and also concerns other questions including professional training, entrance onto the labor market (large firms were obliged to employ a specific percentage of individuals with disabilities in their workforce), and social inclusion. The Framework Law defines individuals with disabilities as "persons who have a physical, mental or sensory disability, whether stable or progressive, that causes difficulty in learning, interrelation or inclusion, such as to give rise to a process of social disadvantage".
